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Cleanup workers consider unions

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LIBBY — Spurred to action by recent wage cuts, organizers are urging local asbestos cleanup workers to unionize.

Representatives of the International Union of Operating Engineers and the Laborers International Union of North America met last week with about 15 workers.

"Even though it's going to take everybody, it's going to start with a few," said operating engineers regional director Rick Pound.

The unions offered their support to the workers after the Environmental Protection Agency ordered the Volpe Center, which handles contracts for a variety of other federal agencies, to re-evaluate the payroll for the Libby Superfund project based on federal

Davis-Bacon Act wage schedules.

The result was a reduction in wages for most workers from \$24.29 to \$29.38 an hour to \$14 to \$18 per hour.

The change in wages stemmed from a reclassification of most workers' duties from heavy construction to residential construction.

Although the EPA has since recommended an increase in wages for most workers to \$19.55, the unions have asked the U.S. Department of Labor to consider that the wages paid to clean up 200 homes in Libby have become the prevailing wage and should be maintained.

Laborers Union organizer Randy Siemers told the workers that he has submitted a request under the federal Freedom of Information Act for copies of the payroll for the Libby cleanup to support the claim for the prevailing wage.

Organizer Mike Jonas compared the

cleanup workers' treatment to the actions of the vermiculite industry that made the cleanup necessary.

"The reason you're here in the first place is because people lied to people and cheated people and people ended up dying because of it," he told the workers.

Jonas said the unions want to help in Libby but need the support of the workers. In addition to the wage issue, Jonas said he's heard about safety concerns from workers along with stories about cleanup work not being done properly.

"These are all issues that unions can intervene in," he said.

The cleanup companies are preying on Libby because they know it's a small, economically depressed community, Pound said.

"They know that you guys are going to work for whatever they're going to give you, and that ain't right," he said.

Unions can provide training to educate workers about the hazards associated with their jobs and protect them from being fired for balking at unsafe conditions, Pound said.

"I've been told, 'You want to go home?'" said one worker who expressed concerns about safety.

Several workers talked about being rushed to meet the cleanup timetable and being threatened with the loss of their jobs if deadlines were not met.

"This is typical corporation stuff, whether it's in Libby, Montana, or whether it's in Seattle, where I live," Pound said.

In closing the meeting, the organizers said the workers in attendance would be considered the nucleus of a local organizing committee.

"We've done a lot of work and spent a lot of funds, but at some point the people here have to step up and show us some support," Jonas said.